DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 879 PS 017 515

AUTHOR Zimiles, Herbert
TITLE Quandaries in the Trend toward Earlier Education: The Role of Research.
PUB DATE Jun 87
NOTE 12p.; In: The Lipman Papers: Appropriate Programs for Four-Year-Olds; see PS 017 508.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; *Early Childhood Education; *Educational Change; Family Environment; Preschool Education; *Research and Development; *Research Methodology; Research Needs; Research Problems; *Research Utilization; Separation Anxiety; Stimulation; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

This presentation uses the premise that educational practice currently derives little benefit from the mass of ongoing research as a starting point for a reassessment of the values and goals of research. Particular emphasis is placed on the relation between research and educational practices involving 4-year-olds. The first part of the discussion deals with aspects of research that reduce its effectiveness. These include the disorienting impact of research literature on practitioners; the synthetic role of research and the integrative needs of practice; and irreconcilable aspects of the relation between research and practice. An important way in which research can help the educator is to describe and analyze what actually occurs in classrooms, and in exemplary classrooms in particular. A discussion of change in attitudes toward preschool education is followed by a consideration of such topics as the cognitive environment of the home, the influence of separation from mothers on children, implications of recent studies of cognitive development, cognitive skill and cognitive stimulation, and the design of schools for 4-year-olds. Concluding discussion profiles a longitudinal study of the beginnings of reading among 40 children; points out the value of the life span perspective for research on young children; and indicates the need for improved ways of assessing effects of preschool. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED297879

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Quandries in the Trend Toward Earlier Education: The Role of Research

Herbert Zimiles
University of Michigan

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Rosestelle B. Woolner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The presenter provides an reassessment of the values and goals of research, especially the relation between research and practice for four-year-olds. He further describes ways to improve the effectiveness of research in early childhood education and to arrive at a more realistic conception of the role of research.

I want to take this occasion, which is an inaugural, of sorts, of a new research center in early childhood education, to raise questions about the most productive role of research. Without quashing the enthusiasm that such an opportunity arouses, I would like to stir a reassessment of the values and goals of research, especially the relation between research and practice. Following this discussion of broad issues, I will turn more directly to the focus of this conference -- the education of four-year-olds -- by raising some questions that will illustrate the more general themes with which I will begin.

The first part of my paper deals with problematic features of research that reduce its effectiveness. The problems pertain both to the way in which research is carried out and the lack of connection between educational research and practice. These are interrelated issues; if the abyss between research and practice were to be bridged, it is likely that the manner in which we conduct research would also undergo change. My aims are both to improve the effectiveness of research in early childhood education and to arrive at a more realistic conception of the role of research.

Some Wayward Research Patterns

I start with the premise that educational practice currently derives slim benefits from the mass of ongoing research. According to my view, this state of affairs is partly attributable to the fact that researchers have adopted a set of strategies and outlooks that impair the effectiveness of their work, and partly attributable to the lack of close and effective working relationships between research and practice.

The Disparate Perspectives of Research and Practice

The relationship between research and practice varies widely, but more often than not research functions independently of the practitioner so as not to be constrained by the idiosyncratic characteristics of a specific situation. Moreover, since research is geared to study rather than to act, it adopts a distinctive pace, focus and method that will allow us to know and learn what we now incompletely understand. The researcher is free to fly high in order to command a wide perspective, then he or she zeroes in on what it has been decided to investigate. The teacher is seen as one of countless ant-like creatures on the ground whose vision is confined to the thorny human terrain of her particular classroom. On the other hand, it is the teacher who is up close and in constant touch with the phenomena, whereas the researcher's view tends to be remote and schematic.

I prefer to think of these two professional orientations as sharing a common ground; in effect, both the researcher and the practitioner are child psychologists. The teacher is an applied child psychologist. If the school is seen as a psychological field, the teacher is one who intervenes in support of the child's psychological growth and well-being. But because the educator must deal with the whole child while the researcher has the luxury of abstracting some facet of the totality of psychological functioning for systematic molecular study, they drift into different mappings of the same phenomena. This rift has adverse consequences for both parties. Researchers tend to generate less valid and theoretically meaningful knowledge, and their results tend to foster a confusing vision of the corpus of knowledge in child development, one that may hinder the work of the educator.

PS 017515

Several interrelated operational codes and philosophical outlooks contribute to the failure of research to realize its full potential. They are: the tendency to assume a reductionist posture, the worship of quantitative methods, the favored position of the experimental method, the persistent allegiance to nomothetic approaches to measurement and assessment, and the tradition of viewing research as a vehicle for verification rather than exploration.

The Irresistibility of Reductionism

To be drawn to reductionism is a natural but upending predilection most of us share. We have learned that one way to understand something is to reduce it to its elements and then to break it down still further as we redefine what are the basic elements in an unending path of microscopic analysis. This mode frequently works in the study of the physical sciences, but in other realms continued pulverization of the phenomena under study destroys their essence. In many spheres of psychological research it is vitally important to preserve the wholeness of the phenomena under study. While it is true that various components of psychological functioning become progressively more individuated, especially when we are dealing with the young child, it is the web of interconnectedness of behavior that we must master rather than the dissection of behavior into basic elements.

The Lure of Quantification

We continue to believe that something truly exists only if it can be measured. As a result, we wind up studying that which can be measured rather than that which we regard to be important. It is understandable that at any given moment we might feel more comfortable dealing with something that is measurable than something that is not, but the cumulative effect of acting on this preference has led to the gradual construction of a model of the psyche that is restricted to measurable constructs, a model that is as a consequence unnecessarily distorted and emaciated.

The Primacy of the Experimental Method

The quest for precision, exemplified by the emphasis on quantification, leads also to a preference for the experimental method as opposed to naturalistic observation. The experimental method produces results that are less ambiguous to interpret, but this approach introduces its own severe limitations. It confines us to only the comparative handful of facets of behavior that are quantifiable and amenable to experimental manipulation. It also exposes us to the risk that our experimental analysis will fail to simulate the phenomena we intend to study.

Eliminating Uncertainty vs. Deepening Understanding

The analytic mode in which researchers are trained provides skills in dissecting and tearing apart. Such skills fit the view of research as an enterprise geared toward nailing things down rather than opening things up. We tend to view research as a means of establishing certainty, as helping us to come to a definite conclusion about a relatively small matter rather than as a vehicle for broadening our vistas. We are more intent upon stamping out minor pockets of ambiguity, painfully difficult as this turns out to be, than on expanding our exposure to the complexity that inheres in human behavior. To increase the feeling of certainty is valued more than the act of uncovering.

Nomothetic vs. Idiographic Methods

A particularly troublesome factor, whose problematic features are not visible at first glance, is the tendency to adopt nomothetic methods of assessment, to use the same yardstick to measure all people. First it should be noted that our measuring instruments are not as stable and precise as a real yardstick. More important, this outlook prevents us from recognizing that it is only in the case of some people that it is their length, for example, that is salient. For others, it should be more relevant to assess their weight and for still others some other trait should be our target for assessment, such as their fearfulness or their vitality. Why not, then, obtain measures of all these traits nomothetically? It is possible to assess each person's length, weight, fearfulness and vitality. But we usually lack the time or money to gather so much data -- and it gets to be confusing. When we attempt to measure everyone with respect to everything, what really matters about each person gets lost. Further, most of our measures would drown in a sea of error under such

circumstances. Our ability to measure many traits varies according to their magnitude; we are more likely to achieve acceptable levels of precision when we confine our assessments to those manifestations of a trait that are prominent. So it is the quality of our measurements, as well as their clarity and salience, that suffers when we cling to nomothetic rather than idiographic forms of assessment.

The Divergent Paths of Research and Practice

Some of these misguided methodological orientations of research would change if researchers were more closely linked to the world of educational practice. If we listen to teachers of young children talk about the members of their class, they almost always speak about the whole child, not some fragment of his or her behavior. And when they use trait descriptions, their statements are idiographic rather than nomothetic. They tend to use different ideas and concepts to describe different children because the traits they cite are differentially salient in capturing the essential features of different children. As matters now stand, the practitioner seldom reaps great benefits from the mass of research that is being conducted, even though much of it is ostensibly aimed at generating useful information. And correspondingly, the validity of much research is impaired by the fact that it is so uninformed by the perspective and knowledge of the practitioner.

The Disorienting Impact of the Research Literature

Not only is the world of research less helpful to the educational practitioner than it might be, it may also, inadvertently, introduce an element of confusion. The enormous rise in the volume of research has led to a profusion of journals exclusively devoted to publishing research findings. For example, the rapidly growing, and by now voluminous, child development literature is dominated by reports of research. What appears in print about children are mostly descriptions of what child development researchers are grappling to understand at that moment. The sheer volume of current publications, and the tendency of child development researchers to confine their conversations to that which is currently being published, gives rise to the impression that the current literature embodies what is known and regarded to be important about the nature of children's development. In actuality, the research literature represents what is fashionable at the moment, and the level of analysis reflects the abstract, fragmented, measurement-oriented character of research.

For the practitioner to read this literature is to stand in shifting sand. It mitigates against building a stable set of ideas and priorities about children's development. When those who work with children, tired and in need of substenance after a hard day, decide to visit the nearest research restaurant, all they find in the menu is a listing of the catch of the day. Instead of shouting, "Where's the beef?", they shrink into their seats and murmur to themselves, "They must be eating bluefish these days." What are educators to think upon encountering this voluminous writing and discussion that is out of phase with what they are thinking about? They will either conclude that their own thinking is obsolete or flawed in some serious way or that the child development researcher is off the track.

I suspect that many teachers are left feeling inadequate and bewildered by the current literature and come to distrust their own knowledge and experience. It may induce an air of resignation and passivity that further impairs their effectiveness. As teachers lose faith in their ability to deal with the complexity they encounter, the researcher is called upon to devise teacher-proof methods of working with children, methods based on the assumption that the teacher's role must be bypassed -- an assumption that in my view is fundamentally untenable and will have disastrous consequences for children.

Instead of being relegated to the position of consumer of research, practitioners should be regarded as equal partners in the task of unravelling the mysteries of child development and effective education. They have continuing access to child behavior in all of its complexity. Researchers are better trained to think systematically about the phenomena encountered, but it is the practitioner who is forced to come to terms with a level of complexity that the researcher has the privilege of evading. By pooling their different but complementary skills, they would be in a stronger position to master the complexities of child development. But this means regarding the classroom as a central arena for learning about young children and early education and the teacher as a primary agent in the search for knowledge.

The Synthetic Role of Research and the Integrative Needs of Practice

At the same time that I am calling for a redirection of method and focus in early childhood educational research, we need to bear in mind that we do not lack essential knowledge of how to teach children effectively. A great deal is known about how young children should be educated. The problems lie in recruiting gifted teacher candidates, creating solid teacher training programs and helping teachers and schools to implement what is already known. One of the greatest needs is for the profession to be helped to use the knowledge that already exists -- to codify that knowledge in a way that makes it more useable and, after that, to expand it. Thus, an important role for research is to conduct comprehensive observation and analysis of ongoing exemplary educational programs. Such work requires having easy and full access to such programs.

Since the process of training is also greatly facilitated by the availability of demonstration schools, it would seem that both research and training should be quartered in facilities that can support an exemplary preschool program in which outstanding educational clinicians serve as teachers and also collaborate with and guide research. Although demonstration schools sometimes deteriorate into showy, glossy operations that are more precious than solid, there is a great need for professionally first-class programs that demonstrate what can be accomplished when full resources are available. The rhetoric of education fails to convey the complexity and subtlety of outstanding educational enactment; for many people it is essential to observe such phenomena in action in order to fully understand all that is entailed in such work.

In claiming that many of the elements of good teaching are known and that the challenge lies in providing the resources and the framework for orchestrating these elements and mounting an effective program, I would like to suggest that the task of educating the public is not so very different from that of feeding the public. We are inundated by fast food not because we don't know how to prepare good food but because the technical and organizational skill for delivering meals of high quality are not always available, and because we are not willing to pay the price for such services. But once a community has access to a good restaurant, and is able to support it financially, its very existence often raises tastes and expectations. The abstract knowledge for preparing good food already exists in cookbooks what is needed are the financial resources and the organizational framework and skills to assemble the necessary elements and put them into operation.

At the risk of overloading this tenuous analogy, I want to give my argument one more twist. I can envision that some people might protest: "Why are you so opposed to fast food? It represents the first time that many people have been able to eat out, and it frequently constitutes an improvement in the nutritive value of their dietary intake. If anything, we have to arrange for the spread of fast food eateries; as matters now stand, they are only available in densely populated areas." There may be some validity to such an argument, but I can only restate my conviction that something must be done to upgrade the level of the complex process of food preparation at the same time that it is being made available on an increasingly widespread basis, and that we need to maintain stellar forms of such operations or we will progressively lose sight of the quality that can be achieved. The rapid growth of early childhood education resembles the rapid growth of the fast food industry in that it is being increasingly called upon to deliver minimal services to more and more people. Nor can the situation be materially improved by investing in research that functions in isolation of the educator. A research center in early education will function more effectively if it operates within a system that serves as a model and a demonstration center and forms the base of collaborative studies with outstanding practicing educators.

Irreconcilable Aspects of the Relation Between Research and Practice

Having focused on issues that would make research in early childhood education more relevant and penetrating, partly by bringing about more symbiotic working relationships between research and practice, it is also necessary to recognize important elements of incompatibility between them. Educational research and practice, strangely, have agendas that clash. The researcher is ever alert to innovations and breakthroughs and is dedicated toward changing the structure of our knowledge. The educator, on the other hand, is devoted to maintaining and sustaining values and modes of the past. The dynamic, swiftly changing world of research is not very compatible with the necessarily conservative role of the educator. One of the most important themes to be introduced and maintained in a classroom for young children is a sense of order and continuity. Especially in today's rapidly changing world, it is vital for teachers to introduce a note of predictability and

stability, to always be there, and to offer a presence that is calm and dependable, and thereby, to help to create a place of anchorage. These values and experiences are needed by young children more than ever before.

Whereas teachers are mainly concerned with sifting through the voluminous literature in child development to find insightful descriptions of how children develop that will endure, researchers focus on what is new and promising and leave the question of ultimate usefulness to others. This is an important dimension of difference between the worlds of research and educational practice that contributes to their alienation. As our insatiable appetites for novelty and change undergo a continuous rise, the researcher is in an ascendant position. There is little incentive for researchers to retreat from or even modulate this mode, and educators cannot abandon their posture of conservatism without betraying their calling. This is a dilemma whose ramifications need to be further explored.

Final Comments on the Role of Research

I have suggested that research has not played a very supportive role in early childhood education and have outlined a number of ways in which research might generate more relevant and valid knowledge. One way to redirect its path is to achieve a more closely-linked working relationship between research and practice. Also needed are ways to distill those research findings that are of relevance to the educator, so that the educator can be apprised of new trends of thought without being distracted from the very durable and complex phenomena of the classroom. The idea that the main job of research is to unearth facts seems misguided; it would be better if researchers ceased to invest so much of their effort to achieving this rarely attained and general overvalued goal. Finally, we tend to underestimate the heuristic value of research, the manner in which research, by the nature of its analytic thrust and its endlessly skeptical entertainment of alternative hypotheses, tends to deepen our understanding of complexity.

An important way in which research can help to facilitate the work of the educator is to describe and analyze what actually transpires in the classroom, especially the exemplary classroom.

On Universal Education for Four-Year-Olds

In confronting the question of universal education for four-year-olds, among the questions that arise are: What is at stake in moving in this direction? Why haven't we done so before and why are we doing so now? And if there were good reasons for not having done it in the past, what has changed to make it appropriate to do now? Are there research findings that might guide what and how we should teach four-year-olds? And finally, how can we tell if a program is effective?

The Changing Face of Preschool Education

If there is an unarguable issue in all of this it is that attitudes toward preschool education have undergone a dramatic change. In part, we are dealing with an idea whose time has come. There has been a steady rise in preschool education for the past several decades, a rise that was spearheaded by the Head Start Program, which finally made preschool education, both visible and available to the less privileged sectors of our society.

In the past, preschool programs for four-year-olds were a frill, delivered in small doses for children in privileged families. Their child-centered mothers had sought out an opportunity for them to participate in group activities and to begin friendships under the benign and well-equipped framework of a nursery school. Now, preschool programs have become a major multifaceted resource for families of the poor, families that are usually larger and, therefore busier, more economically burdened and, therefore, frequently less well-equipped to provide a stimulating, growth-supporting environment for the four-year-old at home. In effect, their availability to families in the inner city and other economically deprived areas have helped to transform preschool programs from highly desirable to indispensable commodities.

Many other factors have influenced this trend. The well-educated and sophisticated middle-class mothers who had been the main clients of preschool programs in the past harbored higher protective attitudes toward their children, including the idea that time spent away from the safety of the home was in and of itself stressful and should, therefore, be carefully measured and regulated. However, shifts in the structure of

society, in the quality of public safety, and in the intrusiveness of other forces brought about by television and other innovations, have changed people's attitudes about the feasibility and even of the desirability of providing a cocoon-like atmosphere for the young child. Moreover, the diminishing size of families along with the widespread move to the surburbs, have left families more isolated and their children with fewer playmates, thereby making the opportunity for children to find friends and social stimulation in preschool even more desirable.

But above all, the changing attitudes of women toward going to work outside of the home while their children are still young, attitudes that have been shaped by a powerful coalition of forces -- ideological considerations stemming from the women's movement, and financial pressures brought on by a depressed economy and by the rapid rise of divorce and the changing demography of young mothers: the combined impact of these forces have served to make preschool programs, including day care, almost a necessity.

There have also been intimations that children are growing up faster (Elkind, 1981: Zimiles, 1986a), whether it is the improved nutrition and medical care or the heightened stimulation provided by television, the amazing array of toys now available and other media. Thus, it has seemed to many that the apparent greater knowledge and awareness of today's children together with signs of their social precocity have rendered the four-year-old more ready than in the past to benefit from preschool and to be less vulnerable to the stresses of being away from home for long periods -- especially, of course, if the mother is not going to be home anyway. There is small wonder, when one considers this litany of social, technological and psychological change, that we are on the eve of advocating universal education for four-year-olds.

Of course, an important difference between what obtains at present and what transpired previously is that the preschool programs for which there is now public support are for all of the children, whereas the preschools of yesterday served mainly those from privileged families. What has also changed is the degree of commitment of government and society to help those children at risk, children whose families have suffered from adversity to a degree that the development of their children is imperiled. And above all, what has changed is not only the demography of mothers (so that not only is our government now committed to helping mothers in need but a larger proportion of mothers are in need), but the willingness of virtually all mothers to stay home and serve as the primary caretaker of their children. In providing new resources and alternatives for the care of <u>some</u> children, we have changed the options and opportunities available to mothers of <u>all</u> children.

Virtually no one doubts the value of early education for four-year-olds when the program is of high quality (though there is not universal agreement about what constitutes a program of high quality). However, given the intricacy of educating young children, the limited availability of outstanding teacher training resources, and the declining appeal of early education as a career, few programs are staffed in a manner that enables them to realize the full potential of early education. Therefore, when faced with the choice between the preschool program available to them and remaining at home, in the case of many children it is not at all clear which alternative arrangement would best support their development. So that when we are asked, and we ask ourselves, "Is it better for a four-year-old to be at home or in school?", we have to ask ourselves, "Which child, from which family and which school would he or she have an opportunity to attend?"

Although most four-year-olds would benefit from attending preschool, there are undoubtedly some children who would be better off at home -- because they are not emotionally ready to be away from home for substantial periods of time, or because their mothers provide a more emotionally supportive and more intellectually stimulating environment than that which would be provided by the particular school they would otherwise attend. On the other hand, there are large numbers of children, today, for whom an alternative to be cared for by their mothers in their homes must be found--either because their mothers are too ill or emotionally unstable to take care of them, or because their mothers must work, or because their mothers prefer to work, and increasingly, because their mothers have decided that they would prefer not to be saddled with the joy of primary caretaking either because they would rather do something else or she does not think that they are particularly good at it.

It is abundantly clear that the more available we make alternatives to childcare at home with the mother as the primary caretaker, the more often will these alternatives be chosen. In sum, there has been a dynamism of change that has affected virtually every aspect of the forces that bear on the issue of whether

four-year-olds should go to school. What is different is not merely that now, at long last, the powers that be are willing to support universal preschool education. What it means to go to preschool and what it means for a child to stay home and what it means for a mother to stay home is changing--even as we talk about it.

Some Unresolved Issues

Despite the rapid currents of social change, there are issues that have been raised in the past that may still be relevant. Among them are questions pertaining to what it was that was good about a child being cared for at home that might now be lost, and others that raise concern about sending a young child to spend a sizeable portion of the day away from home. It is easy to gloss over these questions in the euphoria of achieving such widespread acceptance and support for early education, to assume that our concerns and misgivings of the past have been blown away and made irrelevant by the current whirlwind of change.

The Cognitive Environment of the Home

A recent study conducted in England by Tizard and Hughes (1984), who compared observations of children's language behavior at home and in preschool, helps to remind us of what we may well forget these days. For the purposes of this discussion, I ignore the authors' interest in social class differences. Their report calls attention to the depth and complexity of learning that takes place at home, to the great scope, intimacy and informativeness of mother-child conversations. In discussing the unique features and specific strengths of the home learning environment, the authors point to the vast range of learning that takes place at home as compared with the somewhat circumscribed agenda of interchanges in school. Parent and child have a life in common and therefore share common experiences and frame of reference that enable them to consider events and ideas that could not otherwise be entertained. Other contributing factors are the greater intimacy and individuality of conversations at home stemming from the fact that the learning environment of the home is embedded in contexts of greater personal meaning, as well as the more intense quality of the interactions between mother and child because of the affective bond between them. In the handful of preschools visited by the authors in London, where the study took place, the adult conversational input seemed diluted and trivial in comparison with what they observed at home among the mothers and children who agreed to participate in their study.

In thinking about these findings, apart from the issue of the selectivity of the sample that raises questions about the generality of the results, we need also to bear in mind that home and school environments need not be pitted against each other and should better be thought of as supplementing each other. At the same time, the results serve as an important reminder to those of us who have been quick to dismiss and/or forget the nature and value of the homelife of young children, a home life that is rapidly being attenuated and transformed.

The Influence of Maternal Separation on Children

Another issue which used to be raised in what now seems to be the distant past is the emotional stress that young children were thought to experience when they are dislocated, and, in particular, when they are asked to separate from their primary caretaker and their home environment, and, in addition, asked to live together with other agemates. This issue looms less large today for a variety of reasons: young children seem to be accelerated in their development so that they seem to be more able to cope with separation; we tend not to adopt as protective an attitude toward our young as we used to -- partly because it is more difficult to achieve the same level of protection and insulation that could have been achieved years back, and partly because we have revised our notions about how useful it is in the long run to afford such protection. We value independence more than in the past, are more impressed by the adaptive capacities of young children and see greater benefits accruing to risk-taking than we did in the past.

These considerations notwithstanding, there are still grounds for concern about the stress and tension that many young children will experience when asked to fend for themselves in a new environment. An important issue is whether the defensive reactions adopted by young children in coping with the perceived stress produced by the preschool environment and the separation that it entails will have enduring consequences that will be costly over the long run (Fraiberg, 1977). The anxieties experienced by young children are more difficult for them to understand and therefore to control, and therefore they are likely to be more enduring in their ramifications (Bowlby, 1969; 1973).

Another Hypothesis Regarding the Effects of Maternal Separation

Apart from the very important issue of what it means for children to be separated from their mothers at an earlier age, I believe that we must be concerned also about what it means for mothers to be spared the obligation to care for their children. Some clinicians report that they observe a growing tendency toward the abnegation of parental responsibility and nurturance. We need to ask whether the increasing provision of substitute care for younger children will contribute to a decline in the commitment to parenting. In providing alternative forms of child care for younger children, are we helping or hindering the parent-child relationship over the long run? Does provision of alternative forms of child care permit mothers to care for their children more effectively and more satisfyingly (to both parent and child?) or do these alternative arrangements contribute to the progressive erosion of the commitment to parenting?

There is no doubt that many young children not only survive but flourish in spite of, or perhaps even because of, the enforced partial separation from their mothers. Many mothers know how to compensate for the time lost because of activities that take them away from their children, and others are simply better mothers for the opportunity to do other things and/or for being relieved of some of their childcare responsibilities. But in the past, their alterations in parental roles have proceeded selectively and voluntarily. What is different now is that they are now being instituted on a large-scale basis and will soon become the norm.

Some Implications of Recent Studies of Cognitive Development

If all four-year-olds will be going to school, how should they be taught? Especially relevant are recent studies aimed at identifying the nature of cognitive abilities among three- and four-year-olds. It was Piaget (1952; 1969) who first provided a theoretical framework for looking at cognitive functioning in young children that resonated with the impressions of those had who worked with children and knew them in depth. Emphasizing the vigor of cognitive growth from the earliest moments of life and the power of active (rather than passive, receptive modes of knowing) exploration of the environment as the primary mechanism for structuring and restructuring knowledge, Piaget called attention to the distinctive modes and powerful dynamics of cognitive functioning in early childhood. He made it possible for psychologists to investigate and speculate about the kinds of ideas and conceptions of reality that children entertained at different developmental stages. It was through the force of his work that prohibitions were finally dropped against speculating about the unseen inner psychological framework that give organization to behavior. Prior to the widespread acceptance of his work a couple of decades ago, we were witness to how the research world, with its singular concern for rigorous verification, can envelope itself in so restrictive a methodological code that it is blinded from a reality to which thoughtful practitioners have thorough access.

Cognitive Skill and Cognitive Stimulation

But groundbreaking and illuminating as Piaget's explorations were, they inevitably contained serious gaps along with observations that have come to be questioned. Among them was the tendency to gloss over the conceptual skills of the preschool child. Cognition in the preschool child was described by Piaget mainly in terms of its deficiencies in relation to the skills that emerged in the next stage, as a valley that helped to highlight the mountainous achievements of the neighboring period of concrete operations. Some of the most productive energy of recent research in cognitive development has been directed at identifying the cognitive skills of the preschool child. Psycholinquists have shown that embodied in the everyday language of young children, an ability that we have always taken for granted, is a level of mastery of syntactic principles and symbolic representation that bespeaks a level of cognitive mastery and organization that surpasses anything we have previously attributed to the young child (DeVilliers & DeVilliers, 1978).

Other findings come from studies that challenge Piaget's theoretical premise that there exist qualitatively different stages of cognitive functioning which mark sharp distinctions between the cognitive functioning of preschoolers and those of the succeeding developmental stage (Gelman and Gallistel, 1978; and Wellman, 1977). Some of these new demonstrations of previously unobserved (by researchers) cognitive capabilities in young children have been achieved by rephrasing questions posed to children, and by couching the conceptual task that is to be performed within a framework that is meaningful and understandable to the young child. These have been noteworthy advances, but they entail an understanding of how children

function long known to capable and experienced teachers of young children. It is another instance in which research would have progressed more rapidly if it had been conducted collaboratively with the practitioner.

These new findings help to fill gaps in the canvas that portrays the nature of cognitive development. They remind us of the formidable cognitive skills that are at least nascent in the young child once we know how to call them forth. There is the danger that these findings will be used as a basis for accelerating the education of young children. There are already disturbing signs that many parents have become extraordinarily ambitious about launching the academic careers of their children at younger and younger ages, and thereby provide an early thrust into the orbit of fame and fortune. These new demonstrations of what preschool children can understand and accomplish may well be used to argue that serious academic instruction can be begun at progressively earlier ages. Since we are about to take a long trip, let's start at the crack of dawn rather than waiting until after breakfast. In that way we will reach our destination earlier and gain valuable time, so the argument goes. But if the driver is less ready to begin so arduous a journey so early, fatigue and disheartenment with the entire venture are likely to set in, thereby undermining the effort to achieve greater efficiency.

Given how long life is, I am puzzled by this obsession with getting children going earlier and earlier. Clearly what matters in the beginning is strengthening children for the long haul. Young children need a sustained tranquil period in a stimulating environment during which time they can develop powerful roots, and be helped to develop a view of themselves as effective learners. These goals are less likely to be achieved when learning is imposed from without and at a time when the child may be ill-prepared to respond to such demands.

Some of the impetus for instituting hard-nosed instruction in preschool programs stems from the behavioristic heritage of American psychology. Among the most entrenched of such derivatives of behavioristic thinking is the continuing fascination with the concept of training. We cling to the idea that important change in psychological organization can be instituted by implanting the desired behavior patterns, as if the psychological fabric were reinforcement contingencies. Educators are increasingly being invited to adopt curricula that foster such profoundly complicated behaviors as social skills or creative thinking as if we are dealing with commodities that can be stamped in and then bottled. Some believe that children need only to be trained to emit some of the behaviors associated with a particular pattern, like Eliza Doolittle in Pygmalion, in order to be judged as having undergone an important psychological transformation. Everything rests with the appearance of things to those who are unwilling to speculate about that which lies behind what is directly observable.

The emphasis on training tends to focus on the job to be done and on the children who will be doing it -- and their overriding need to understand better and come to terms with the world that is unfolding before them. Yet, it is also important for children to learn that learning involves work and that at school you learn to work at things -- but that is very different from sending out the message that there is a specific job to be done -- and focusing on the job rather than on the child. Because it is answerable, researchers are drawn to the question of whether "the job" is getting done, and then later on how it can get done more effectively.

In designing a school for a four-year-old, we need to find ways to have children engaged, not managed, and not simply diverted. Or else what children will mainly learn is how to respond to a managing person, or they will begin to think of school as a place where you idly spend your time amid friends and peers in an atmosphere of annoying but tolerable restraint. At the same time, if preschool is to become universally available, there is a danger in the aimlessness of preschool life -- that it will establish a pattern that will be continued. And there is an equal danger that the only way the teacher will know how to interrupt these patterns of budding aimlessness is to institute a structured curriculum and a didactic, managing posture that persuades children that school is boring and a drag, something to put up with and comply with, and also that school is a place where you are managed, that growing up means advancing through a series of hoops through which you are asked to jump.

A Study of Children in School

It is rare to find research that uses the child in school rather than a task to be learned as its starting point and which then proceeds to study children idiographically rather than nomothetically. For this reason, a new book by Bussis, Chittenden, Amarel and Klausner (1985) deserves special mention. It reports the results of a longitudinal study of the beginnings of reading. The study was restricted to 40 children in several different schools who were observed intensively in a multiplicity of activities that were seen as contributing to the development of reading. In attempting to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive characteristics of each of the children, the study highlights the diversity of pathways to the mastery of reading. The authors also posit some cognitive styles that they associate with the acquisition of reading skills -- that is, differences in patterns of cognitive functioning that can be described qualitatively rather than quantitatively. In posting this hypothesis regarding stylistic variations in which children address the task of reading and its cognitive precursors (and it is their understanding of the wide range of skills and experiences that feed into the learning of reading which is most impressive), they do not attempt to pigeon-hole all children into this new framework. Rather, these styles are seen as salient for describing some children but not others. Had they adopted a nomothetic stance, these very interesting patterns would not have been discovered.

The Life Span Perspective

Some research findings in cognitive development that have relevance both for practice and research in early childhood education come from an unlikely source -- the new field of life span development. It is when we turn to the task of assessing cognitive functioning during adulthood and old age that we can no longer brush aside the limitations of nomothetic methods. It becomes apparent that adults assign meaning to different aspects of the same experience, and, in turn, that differences in life experience bring about different cognitive skills and funds of knowledge. For example, the same test cannot be used to obtain meaningful cognitive assessments of a carpenter, an insurance salesman and a pianist, all of who have worked at their occupations for over 40 years. The need for studying individual trajectories of development becomes apparent when studying the psychology of aging (Baltes, et al, 1984). I maintain that this perspective needs to be invoked throughout the life span.

Research in aging is, of course, an occasion for studying the long-term impact of various psychological-influences. It calls to mind rather graphically the phrase "education for life" and thereby reminds us that strategies for teaching children at various ages need to be examined in terms of their potential long-term impact and not merely in relation to how they prepare the child for reaching the next step in the educational ladder. In studying an older individual, we cannot help but ask ourselves, "What has this person made of life?" It is not inappropriate to view four-year-olds, also, as being in the early stages of making something of life.

Evaluating the Effects of Preschools

The effects of preschool education may be expected to extend over a wide range of areas of psychological development, depending upon the characteristics of a particular program and how it influences an individual child. Current methods of assessing preschool impact are not sufficiently precise and are too circumscribed in scope to provide a comprehensive and definitive evaluation of the impact of preschool experience (Zimiles, 1986b and 1986c). Our most useful analyses of the effectiveness of preschool education are likely to come not from testing programs, but from detailed study of a given preschool environment and intensive observation of children's response to that environment.

In addition to their lack of precision, it should be noted that there is a bias introduced by the testing procedures that are customarily used to assess the impact of preschool education. By virtue of the fact that such methods call for the child to be questioned by a strange adult, they are likely to favor children who have attended preschools as opposed to those who have not and to favor those who have attended highly structured and didactic programs as opposed to classrooms that are more informal and relaxed. This bias introduces a spurious element to the sizeable pool of error with which systematic efforts to evaluate preschool experience must contend.

On the Role of Early Experience

In the light of recent efforts to disabuse us of this fact, it seems necessary in concluding this talk, to reassert that early, formative years of life are profoundly important. Few reasonable people boldly claim that the effect of the first few years of life are irreversible, but there are solid grounds for believing that they constitute the foundation of ensuring years of growth and development. Their long-term influence derives from the fact that early childhood is a period of great vulnerability and a time of lesser control over one's environment. Because young children are less able to clearly differentiate and to code in language the nature of their distress, their response to stress tends to be more global and their interpretation of its causes is less amenable to reassessment and self-correction at a later point in time. The early years set in motion a vision of the world and a pattern of expectancies that affect how subsequent events are experienced and assimilated.

References

Baltes, P.B., Dittmann-Kohli, F., & Dixon, R.A. (!984). Excerpts from: New perspectives on the development of intelligence in adulthood: Toward a dual-process conception and a model of delective optimization with compensation. In Life-span development and behavior, Vol. 6. New York: Academic Press.

Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and loss, I: Attachment. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss, II: Separation. New York: Basic Books.

Bussis, A.M., Chittenden, E.A., Amarel, M., & Klausner, E. (1985). Inquiry into meaning: An investigation of learning to read. Hillsdale, NJ: Eribaum.

DeVilliers, D.E., & DeVilliers, J.G. (1978). Language acquisition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Elkind, D. (1981). The hurried child. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Fraiberg, S. (1977). Every child's birthright: In defense of mothering. New York: Basic Books.

Gelman, R., & Gallistel, C. R. (1978). The child's understanding of number. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of intelligence in children. New York: International Universities Press.

Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969). The psychology of the child. New York: Basic Books.

Tizard, B., & Hughes, M. (1984). Young children learning. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wellman, H.M. (1977). Preschooler's understanding of memory-relevant variables. Child Development, 48, 1720-1723.

Zimiles, H. (1986a). The changing American child: The perspective of educators. In T.M. Tomlinson & H. J. Walbergt (Eds.), Academic work and education excellence (pp. 612-84). NSSE Yearbook. Berkeley, CA: McCutchan Publishing Corp. Also, (October, 1982). Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education.

Zimiles, H. (1986b). Rethinking the role of research: New issues and lingering doubts in an era of expanding preschool education. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 1(3), 189-206.

Zimiles, H. (1986c). The social context of early childhood in an era of expanding preschool education. In B. Spodek (Ed.), Today's kindergarten: Exploring the knowledge base (pp. 1-14). New York: Teachers College Press.